TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION REVISITED: THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING EFL IN NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Waheeb S. Albiladi[i]
University of Arkansas,
USA

Abstract:
Learning a new language is a challenging process. It requires learners to devote time and effort to communicate effectively in the target language. One of the main issues in teaching English is not having enough exposure to the language as it is spoken in the real world. That is a major reason why teaching English in a non-English speaking environment can be challenging. Students need to be exposed to native-like resources to develop their language skills. One of the most significant skills to develop is pronunciation. The present paper explores some of the teaching and learning strategies that can be used by foreign language teachers to improve their students' pronunciation skills. Keywords: EFL, English pronunciation, authentic learning, English teaching.

1. Introduction

Learning a new language can be a lifetime process. It requires a huge amount of time and effort. Each language has its own characteristics, and learners must be aware of the ones that exist in a new language (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). The English language continues to grow and spread as the main language of international communication, and millions of students are studying this language all over the world (McKay, 2002). Some of these students study in countries that speak English as a first language, while others learn it in their countries as a foreign language.

According to Horwitz (2008), English as a Second Language (ESL) refers to learning and teaching English in an English-speaking country. Shuck (2013) mentions that this term has been used mostly to refer to international students who study English in one of the English-speaking countries, such as the United States. However, Shuck believes that this term includes not only international students, but also residents who

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[i] Correspondence: email walbilad@gmail.com

learn English for different purposes. Shuck (2013) notes that the ESL population is rich and includes many categories that fall under this term, such as international students who study English for communication purposes; students who are studying at intensive English programs; students who were born in an English-speaking country but speak a language other than English at home; and immigrant children who live in an English-speaking country.

In contrast, Johnson (2008) points out that teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) refers to teaching and learning English in countries where English is not spoken nationally. In other words, EFL refers to teaching English skills to learners who live in non-English-speaking environments. Johnson (2008) notes that the difference between teaching English as a second language and as a foreign language is that EFL classrooms share a native language, whereas ESL classrooms share a target language. For instance, in EFL classrooms, most students speak the same language, while in ESL classrooms there might be students who speak different first languages.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learning English in non-English speaking countries

For many educators, learning and teaching English as a foreign language is a true challenge. Akbari (2015) argues that teaching English as a foreign language involves many of the same challenges that face EFL learners who try to learn English in a non-English-speaking country. Akbari (2015) notes that the lack of native English-language learning resources is one of the most obvious challenges for students. Ideally, when learning a new language, students should be exposed to, and interact with, real-life materials that develop their skills and improve their language proficiency. "*The main obstacle for learning English is that there is no environment that makes them familiar with the original language,*" writes Akbari. "*In other words, there is no active role for English outside the classroom. Therefore, they do not feel the immediate need to learn English. And the educational system should bring about such need.*" (p. 395).

Moreover, there is glaring lack of interest and motivation among EFL students in many non-speaking countries. Not having the desire to learn is one of the most common obstacles that English teachers face. This lack of interest and motivation among students can be attributed to reasons including (but not limited to) static and boring language classes, repetitive activities and ways of teaching, and language instruction that focuses on memorization.

2.2 Teaching and Learning of English Pronunciation

One of the most glaring hurdles English language learners encounter during their language learning journey is pronunciation. Trying to foster native-like pronunciation is usually a source of despair. Not only language learners, but also English teachers, can have difficulties in pronunciation. That is because pronunciation problems vary according to the native languages of the learners. In fact, pronunciation is one of the

most significant aspects of the language to be taught and learned. According to Gilakjani (2012), learners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with poor pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. Vocalis (2005) notes that: *"Pronunciation in English can be a challenging area of language learning. What makes it difficult is that there are various ways to say some of the letters of the alphabet. Take g, for example: it can be pronounced like g in girl, f in rough, j in gel or silent, as in sign."*

2.3 Challenges of teaching pronunciation in non-English speaking environment

The main issue with learning English in non-native country is that students might not be able to get adequate exposure to the language from a native source. As a result, they might have difficulty in understanding and learning all aspects of the language appropriately. Achieving effective and intelligible English pronunciation can be a complex task for students who learn English as a foreign language (Flege & Robert, 1981). That is because each language is distinct from English in many aspects, especially in its sounds. Therefore, non-English native speakers usually have issues with pronunciation when they try to speak. Not only do students have to work hard; their teachers have to work hard as well to find the best ways to teach pronunciation effectively. EFL teachers must become more aware of ways they can help develop EFL learners' competence in pronunciation by using more effective and successful teaching strategies (Otlowski, 1998).

3. Method and Materials

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the recent strategies that can be used by EFL teachers to teach English pronunciation. The reviewed literature consisted of empirical studies, theoretical articles, and books related to teaching English, authentic learning, and strategies for teaching and learning of English. Research that explores teaching and learning of English is at its best. Numerous research studies have examined how language skills are taught and learned. This includes teaching of English reading (Albiladi, 2018; Wijanti, 2017) speaking (Abrar, Mukminin, Habibi, Asyrafi, Makmur & Marzulina, 2018; Angelina, 2019), writing (Indrilla & Ciptaningrum, 2018), and listening (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). However, there seems to be lack of research that explores the teaching and learning of English pronunciation in non-native environment. Therefore, this article explores some of the teaching and learning strategies that can be used by foreign language teachers to improve their students' pronunciation skills.

4. Discussion

Teaching English pronunciation requires teachers to devote their time and effort to incorporate different teaching strategies that motivate students to learn. Thus, the

following are some of the strategies that EFL teachers can use to help students overcome many pronunciation common issues.

4.1. Increase student awareness

Many language learners have trouble pronouncing several English sounds correctly because they are not aware of the sonic differences between English and their first language. These EFL learners might have poor English pronunciation because they lack knowledge of English sounds. In fact, many sounds in English do not exist in in other languages, and vice versa. For example, Arabic speakers might be unfamiliar with certain English consonants (Flege & Robert, 1981) and might have difficulty pronouncing problematic consonants and vowels such as /p/, /v/ and / ng /. For instance, Avery and Ehrlich, (1992) indicate that because the Arabic language does not have a contrastive /v/ sound, Arabic learners tend to substitute it for /f/. Additionally, they tend to substitute the sound /p/ for /b/, because there is no equivalent to /p/ sound in Arabic (Flege & Port, 1981).

These differences cause non-native speakers to mispronounce many English words, so teachers have to help them be aware of the differences between certain sounds in English and their mother tongue. Emphasizing similarities and differences between English and other languages in sounds can be the first strategy to teach pronunciation effectively because if students notice the differences, they will pay more attention to them.

4.2 Listening to improve pronunciation

One of the most effective strategies teachers can use to improve EFL students' pronunciation is by allowing them to listen. Listening to English native speakers is an excellent way to develop pronunciation fluency. Teachers can help their students most by allowing them to hear how native speakers pronounce the sounds. According to Avery & Ehrlich (1992), the first step in learning to pronounce is learning to hear and identify the sound. Listening for certain sounds is crucial to correct pronunciation. In turn, if the English learners learn to pronounce the words correctly, it will be easier for them to hear and recognize these sounds. Also, if the learners learn to listen for and identify sounds, they will be able to pronounce them correctly.

Listening and pronunciation are interrelated skills and cannot be separated. EFL teachers should be aware of the significant role of listening in enhancing students' pronunciation. By designing lesson plans that emphasize the interaction between these skills, EFL teachers can help students improve their pronunciation fluency. In particular, listening to native speakers can give students a clear idea of how sounds should be pronounced (Mendelson, 1987). By listening to native speakers, students learn to identify and recognize how each letter is and should be pronounced. Teachers should encourage students to listen to native speakers on the news, television, radio, or any other audio sources so they can recognize the sounds. This will lead to better and more intelligible pronunciation.

4.3 Teaching English rhythm and stress

Many EFL learners have difficulty mastering English pronunciation, and the major result of this is improper English rhythm (Moriya, 1988). Rhythm is the timing patterns among syllables. However, timing patterns are not the same in all languages, and there are two opposite types of rhythm in languages: stress-timed and syllable-timed (Chen, 1996). For instance, English is stress-timed, while many other languages such as Arabic and most Asian languages, with nearly equal weight and time in all syllables, is syllable-timed (Flege, & Robert, 1981). So these two languages are very different in rhythm. Unfortunately, many students seem not to be aware of this difference. As a consequence, they tend to apply the rhythms of their mother language, which is syllable-timed. This causes them to have unclear pronunciation when they speak English. Students who do not know these differences tend to give each syllable almost the same strength, length, and pitch. To avoid these issues, EFL teachers must explain explicitly the difference between English and students' first-language rhythms. Furthermore, it is key that ESL learners understand which words of a sentence are stressed and which are not in order to have fluent pronunciation (Gilakjani, 2012). Significantly, English words are divided into two groups: English content words such as main verbs, nouns, adjectives, and question words. These words are usually stressed. On the other hand, function words such as articles and prepositions are usually unstressed (Gilakjani, 2012).

However, there are many effective steps EFL teachers can take to help students understand English rhythms and stresses. First, when teaching a new word, the teachers also need to teach its stress pattern. The teachers can emphasize stressed syllables using various visual effects. Second, EFL teachers might ask students to predict stress in words. Many pronunciation textbooks provide word stress pattern rules. However, teachers should help their students discover the rules, instead of simply telling them the rules. They can generate word stress pattern rules from words they have already learned and apply the same rules to words they do not know. In this way, instead of memorizing rules, students internalize them. Third, teachers can provide students with charts that explain the differences between stressed and unstressed syllables. Some charts help students understand how stressed syllables differ from unstressed ones in terms of three features: loudness, length, and pitch. Knowing the differences will help them acquire the correct rhythm. Finally, students can learn stress patterns in English by saying English rhymes. To say an English rhyme, students must stress certain words and weaken others. It helps students learn the language's natural rhythm.

Overall, EFL teachers must be aware of the importance of teaching English rhythm to EFL students. Since many EFL students tend to use their first language rhythm in their English speech, many educators believe that teaching English rhythm (stress-timed) to EFL students is well worth the effort. EFL teachers have to spend some time working on English rhythms, besides individual sounds. By teaching English rhythm, teachers may see surprising progress in their students' English pronunciation.

4.4 Authentic and context rich activities

EFL teachers should try to provide authentic, context-rich activities that help students practice the specific area of pronunciation (Gilakjani, 2012). In other words, contextualizing activities will make them more effective and interesting. For instance, EFL teachers can provide students with samples of native English sounds taken directly from news or television series to practice. Students will be motivated to participate and be engaged in such activities because of the nature of authentic materials. These types of materials increase students' motivation for learning and allow them to explore language learning beyond classes (Albiladi, 2019). On the other hand, using more traditional methods to teach pronunciation might limit the opportunities for students to learn correct and clear pronunciation. Unlike authentic pronunciation materials, many traditional pronunciation texts focus on teaching individual sounds, or vowels, and ignore the differences and similarities between English sounds and those of the students' native language. According to Avery and Ehrlich (1992), the traditional approach to teaching pronunciation gives priority to the wrong aspects of pronunciation. Therefore, to help enhance students' English pronunciation, EFL teachers should provide students with authentic and context-rich activities. Many online sources of authentic material exist, and EFL teachers might benefit from them when teaching pronunciation.

4.5. Using a variety of classroom activities

To teach a productive lesson in pronunciation, EFL teachers should provide students with a variety of different learning activities. Fortunately, many activities can help students improve and practice their pronunciation in English classes. Following are some of the pronunciation techniques and methods that can be used to improve students' oral abilities:

4.5.1. Minimal Pairs

Minimal pairs refer to pairs of words that have different meanings and vary in pronunciation in one sound only. In essence, minimal pairs allow teachers to target the problematic phoneme. Also, these types of activities show the student how a tiny, sometimes barely noticeable, change in pronunciation can actually change the meaning of what they are saying. For instance, the words (sheep, ship) and (cheap, chip) are minimal pairs. Therefore, using minimal pair activities in the classroom helps demonstrate the effects of individual sounds. Moreover, it helps students distinguish between problematic sounds such as /b/ and /v/ in words like /boat/ and /vote/. In addition, minimal pairs might help students develop their ability to recognize sound contrasts and produce these contrasts correctly. EFL teachers can use individual sound activities during listening/speaking classes, because this kind of activity helps students learn correct pronunciation. Having a correct pronunciation should be a target for all EFL classes.

4.5.2. Visual Aids

EFL teachers can use visual aids and pictures to teach pronunciation. Visual aids are useful tools that can help increase students' awareness of the production of sounds (Lin, 1995). These visuals help teachers demonstrate the differences in articulation of English sounds. Teachers can provide students with charts and graphs that show the correct way to pronounce words. If students see how the correct pronunciation occurs, they are more likely to pronounce most of the sounds correctly. Generally speaking, visuals and pictures are preferred methods in learning. Many students prefer to see rather than read or listen. Therefore, if EFL students are exposed to different visuals that illustrate the different positions of tongue or teeth during pronunciation, they will be better able to produce the sounds correctly (Fraser & Perth, 1999).

4.5.3. Tongue Twisters

Another activity that can be used to teach pronunciation is tongue-twisters. Tongue-twisters are interesting ways to practice and contrast similar sounds and have fun at the same time (Lin, 1995). Teachers should motivate students to do their best and ignore their mistakes, because tongue-twisters are hard even for native speakers. EFL learners might have difficulty with tongue-twisters in the beginning but trying to say them will help enhance their pronunciation. Also, it might make the class more interesting and appealing, and this is important in order to encourage them to practice.

In brief, using minimal pairs activities, using visual aids and pictures, contextualizing pronunciation activities, and teaching English rhythms are effective strategies that EFL teachers can use in the classroom to teach and develop students' pronunciation skills.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, paradoxically, pronunciation is one of the most significant skills to develop, but it is also a difficult skill to learn and teach. To obtain this skill, EFL teachers and students have to work hard. Many students have difficulties in speaking and pronouncing English for distinct reasons. Therefore, teachers have to deal positively with these students and find ways to increase their motivation. Students might see pronunciation activities as less interesting than other English exercises. One way to eliminate or at least reduce this problem is to teach pronunciation in different ways. In non-speaking countries, teachers need to find alternate ways to teach students a new language such as English. Increasing students' awareness, encouraging them to listen, and using a variety of engaging learning activities inside the classroom are excellent and effective ways to teach pronunciation. Differentiating classroom activities is away that teachers can use to respond to the need of all learners (Alshareef, 2018). Although EFL students might not have a chance to travel to countries that speak English, these methods can reduce the distance barrier. Finally, both teachers and students should have the same expectations for learning and teaching pronunciation.

This will help students and teachers work toward the same goal. This will help students and teachers work for the same goal and as Otlowski (1998) mentions:

> *"All students can do well in learning the pronunciation of a foreign language if the teacher and student participate together in the total learning process. Success can be achieved if each have set, respectively, individual teaching and learning goals. Pronunciation must be viewed as more than correct production of phonemes: it must be viewed in the same light as grammar, syntax, and discourse that is a crucial part of communication."* (Otlowski, 1998, p.4).

About the Author(s)

Waheeb S. Albiladi is a PhD candidate in the TESOL program at the University of Arkansas. He has 8 years of experience in teaching English as a second/foreign language. His research interests include technology in English teaching and learning, bilingual education, and teachers' use of data.

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